

[**All For One, One For All, One** by dropout-ninja](#)

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Summary: A parasite traveling from world to world, a hivemind connecting all in unity, a being that applied to nothing at all- 3 unrelated oneshots regarding the shadow monster and giving alternate views on it.

1. Parasite

-It always did enjoy watching the protectors of different realms crumble.-

AN- Originally posted on AO3 and was inspired by AO3 author IceCreamRaven and their 'Eldritch' series, which explores different takes on the Shadow Monster- I do recommend you go visit them if your cup of tea is inhuman perspectives

Stranger Things and its characters do not belong to me. All rights go to their respective owners.

These will all be from the Mind Flayer's perspective but none will be connected, nor are they my typical headcanons. Please enjoy a mess of theories and inhuman POV's.

For this chapter, MF refers to itself as 'it'. Another being is referred to as 'they'. This can make certain sections confusing but I hope that as a whole this is still understandable and enjoyable.

It was time.

Time, as it were, to change. To end it.

For the last stagnating breathes, it had lived here. This shadowed world that it had found. The world suited it. It grew inside of it and watched the insects of this world panic and struggle. And there had been *them*. The protector of the realm. The god of storms. The creature of shadows.

It had taken such glee at watching them try again and again to stop its growth. At the start, they had won. Won again and again.

Again and again and again until finally-

Finally they realized.

Every victory was false. Every celebration was watched in amusement. And so even the god of this world felt their hope die.

The moment, the memory, still made it pulse with ecstasy.

It always did enjoy watching the protectors of different realms crumble. Every time was a highlight of its existence.

This one had been even more lovely than most. Sometimes, it let the figurehead defender get a few victories and then ended the guardian there and used the newly stolen form and powers to destroy all those it held...dear? That was the word. Such a silly, alien word.

But sometimes it did the opposite. Sometimes, it left the champion be until their entire world had been stolen from them. It had done it to σκιά. When the being finally realized how doomed they were, they took their storm to it. They flattened their entire shadowed form.

They begged.

And it devoured them.

Not immediately. First it gave a peal of humor and stole more. It let σκιά plead until finally there was nothing at all left to plead for. And because of how valiantly they had fought it, it left them be. But the being had become despondent. The shadows drifted apart. Boring. Their form was weak and they made no effort to revive themselves after their epiphany; it could not be defeated. When it finally forced the land around their form and took their everything, they tried one last valiant attempt to destroy it.

For millennia, it had worn σκιά's form. There was something so deliciously whole about it, and that was apart from the pleasure it took in controlling this latest guardians body/mind/soul.

It hadn't even searched for a new realm in ages. The hunger for more hadn't begun to annoy. σκιά and their form satisfied it in almost every way.

Almost- because never had it been satisfied.

Then, like worlds ninety-five, two hundred two, one thousand eight...someone reached for it .

It always liked it when they did that.

It helped to add a delightful touch of guilt to the panic.

This one had reached out across the void. It remembered the void. How *hungry* it had been in there. There was no functioning without another. It had to have something to rip apart and lodge inside of. But it still remembered how to use the void.

After all it was still able to toss that...girl?...through it. But that was a good time later after the first connection.

The Advanced had found one of the mindless creatures of this current world. Not that they always had been. Oh no. It tossed and twirled its smoke in hilarity. No, no, they had minds once. None other than *οκιά* had been Advanced, not like this girl, not like the various it had seen throughout the realms. But they all had once had minds and persons, their scientists and priests. It had shredded them all, one by one, absorbing memories and leaving a taint of control as it jumped creature to creature and environment to environment to get to *οκιά*. Its form spread invisible across millions of realms in this way even if it chose one primary being to infect as a personal host.

The drone had been feeding when the new alien touched it. The world of shadows found the new world and stole its form just like it stole other creatures forms; such was the way this shadow realm existed. And the taint left inside its now animal body tore forth.

What? It had enjoyed its time in this form and world *but she had knocked.*

A new host of a new world. What was it to do? Fight the instincts that gave it such pleasure when it watched terror and panic and despair?

So it had taken what it could. It had gradually spread.

It built. It built for her. Because it saw, when it crept more and more into this world, who the guardian/champion/god of this world was. A little body, but a powerful mind.

A worthy trade off for *οκιά*'s delightful but old form.

The first tear was sealed up and it had been enraging, it had let that

rage through to the Advanced on the other side so she could taste the seeming anger at defeat...

And then it had brought a storm around it and swirled its shadow reach to every end of this stagnant world that now wore the skin of this world of new hosts. Humans. They were adorable.

And they were celebrating now.

Oh, it had missed this. *It had missed this.*

How fun it was to watch insects dance in victory and spew hollow expressions and share emotions all under the impression they had won. String along, play defeated, disappear from view. And then taste the despair when they discovered it was not gone.

And eventually, bask in the complete hopelessness when they realized it never would be gone. Any form they managed to defeat was just that; just a hollow shell it could easily leave and retreat back to a million others.

It hoped this Advanced was as much fun as *ókiá* had been.

The one spy it sent in found the language. After that, the meaningless noise shared between these aliens became reason. It was a vocal communication, with meaningless inflections and differences- little matter to it.

Then, it waited while part of its current form settled on the ground of the new world. Had *ókiá* still had enough left of their mind to listen, it would've taunted them with words on how similar such an angelic champions functions were to a 'worthless parasite', as the shadow had once called it, like itself. How easily this form twisted and splintered into fractions that could infect others.

The original tear had never truly closed itself on the end it held open. While the humans could think it was shut off, it could see them quite clearly. It watched them dance. It dreamed of what it would build. It tasted what it would take- that was its purpose after all.

Then humans opened it again. The fraction split off began its work. Work and pain, not its of course but every mind it shredded to make

room for itself, all for her. For her to see and begin to fight and begin to despair; it always liked to see its new hosts reaction to what it planned to do to them.

And it told her so. It trapped her in a mental world she thought herself so safe in. If only she knew the worlds it had seen, it had conquered , then she would realize how her power was nothing special.

The human words may not have perfectly encapsulated what a being like it meant to say. It promised to end her because there were no human words closer than that. And it did plan to; it would take her form, her mind, her strength. There would be nothing left of her to remain after that process. It *would* be her **end**.

And then her 'friends', as the human body it rested in supplied the word, would end too. Everyone. The entire world. It would be all...not 'its'. That implied a possession.

All it. It would enter everything, host in every creature and element.

And it still wouldn't be satisfied. But it would feel the thrill of the hunt, the joy of a new host, the emotions from the aliens- and that was likely the most enjoyable part. Because when the insects ran and felt all their insect feelings towards each other and towards itself, it felt them. It grasped them and soaked in them.

It was the closest it ever got to *feeling* concepts like hope and despair, happiness and horror, peace and pain. Concepts unattached to taking new bodies. The memories left over were too distant to soak the remembered sensations in.

That was reality.

It roamed, it infected, it watched amused as the rivals to its power realized that nothing could hurt it.

Not the silly fire element of this world thrown at the flesh form the fraction of it took in the human world.

Not melting the forms it infected.

Not stabbing through one such infected form.

It was time.

And it was time, as it were, to change. To *feel-*

Agony.

Because σκλά had not been wrong; it was a parasite. It stole forms, memories, minds, feelings. And it stretched over every world it kept track of, every form it still remembered the number for, and left nothing but itself in its wake.

Every host was it.

Every world.

Everything- it.

And in one moment, it lost a part of itself. It hadn't focused on the tear from its end. And when the human opening closed itself suddenly, it slammed across its incorporeal mental body that stretched across a million worlds and realities and suddenly-suddenly- it did not in this human one it didn't it wasn't-

It wasn't-

Every host it stole had left over memories that provided it with the equivalent to what it now felt.

A missing shard/light/limb/twin-

Something had hurt it.

That Advanced had.

Oh, it would make her hurt. It would.

But at the moment, it reeled in confusion and pain pain pain

For the first time, it felt exactly what all those insects or realm protectors did when it score a win against them.

σκιά's deliciously whole form that had felt so compatible with its purpose to infect was as injured as it was; part of its shadow had been left on the other side and disconnected from it/them.

And even as the tear peeled open once more on the human side, it stayed despondently spread on the ground of the stagnant world and nursed that phantom pain. The parallels sickened it but even that disgust at itself equated to nothing when compared to what it had felt when it had been disconnected to its hosts.

Because for the first time, it wondered if one of these guardians it went about taunting would be powerful enough to cut off its connection to every host, every world and creature and element it had infected, and leave it to starve in that void once more.

AN- Thank you for your time!

If you enjoyed, please drop a review- and if you notice any grammar/ spelling mistakes, please point them out so I may fix them :

2. HIVEMIND

'Individual' was a concept that had never been introduced until the gap between our worlds was bridged.

AN- This went a completely different direction than I had planned, but that's about the only warning for this chapter (also possession, same as last chap)

Any confusion this brings about will hopefully be cleared up by the ending
AN

A few important lines come from the comic about Will in the Upside Down
Enjoy!

The universe is vast. We all understand this. But we know of only two worlds. It had been only One. And then a new entity found this world. Bridged the gap between the One and the not-One. This new world was chaos where the One were serenity. Why any could chose that pain is lost on us.

The girl that bridged the gap showed us a new world of knowledge. Knowledge and sensations that we could be joined to. But she fights. She tries to block us out.

It is nonsensical. We are peace. We are One.

One in absolute unity.

And soon the girl would join the One; everyone of them knew this.

The first of you, he was part of them too. Those humans thought he was cut off after that heat. But he had to know that was wrong. He did. He heard us still. Because we had told him, when his body lay dying here and his mind began to wander, that he was part of us. Told him and every other human dragged into our world, plainly, that

WE'RE HERE

WE'RE ALWAYS HERE

And he would belong to us now.

Why did he fight then?

He said to stop. Said we hurt him. Worried about 'death'. A silly concept. Once unified as part of the One, you could not die. You can't die. Why are you still scared?

That is pointless. And begging is pointless. They have to understand that we can't stop. We cannot stop joining every mind under ours- we cannot stop serene unity.

So it is pointless to fight. To say they can die. Death is nothing more than a concept now. Should their physical form die, they still are connected to **EVERY SENSE** . Every mouth. Every skin cell. Every nerve. Every eye.

No. That world will not be left alone. Not left in its irrational chaos. Not left disconnected. They must be unified.

We can't stop. The desire to learn fuels us. And each new mind from this place came with more. Through this, we became knowledge, embodied wisdom, breathed experience. Every piece of us sees, hears, smells, feels, touches, tastes, adds a part of the world. And an individual is limited to their own senses- why would that be the choice? Confusion- that confused us about the not-One world. Here, **ALL WERE ONE**.

'Individual' was a concept that had never been introduced until the gap between our worlds was bridged. And this world of individuals, your world, it made no sense.

It revels in chaos. It is full of difference. Feelings-sensations-thoughts and yet instead of pooling that you erase each other over that knowledge.

let

me go

go

We are helping you. All that chaos, it is alien but it is experience-knowledge. We revel in knowledge. But unity. A common denominator under all that chaos. And you will benefit. You, a strange...individual, will. You will be free to be what you are.

You will see all. You will reach across us ajoined with all.

Share. Love. Survive.

Directed chaos.

Beautiful knowledge.

hurts

Why? We are helping. We see you. Who you adore. When both are One, they will see. No human language barriers. No human laws. **FREEDOM.** See? It will be better for you both. For your family- total unity. All, every one of you and **US.** All as One.

ONE-

That is our aim. We both, you and us, we are working at building. Building a persons-person. Person.

The best person.

Hear all. See all. Feel all.

Why are you blaming us?

stoppleasejuststop

You are aggravating. Aggravating in your stupidity. At this moment you can feel the others-

hurts

YOU WILL BE FREE. YOU WILL BE ONE.

nodoesn'tworkthatway. notforus. you'rehurtingme

...we-

We don't understand.

you never will.

No we cannot accept that. When you join, all of you, in the black- It will be **UNITY**. It will not be chaos. It will be **KNOWLEDGE**. With all of you in unity with us, we all will understand.

do-

do you really believe that?

Silence.

not what you want. you want my noise. my entire noise. always. my thoughts. my-...-incomprehensibility

Your noise will be quieted. Only the useful to the One shall remain.

hurts

How? It helps. It helps us all.

hurts others

They are not a part of us. They do not matter.

disgusting

You are disgusting.

Not us. We are not. Not us.

go ahead. lie to yourself. i'm done with you

NO! You'll always be a part of us.

a disgusting part?

Yes! No! What? No. The One loves each member. Each mind contributes to our knowledge. Our pool of thought. You-you're not

disgusting.

Why are you quiet now?

Stop being silent! No-wait no-do be quiet-wait-

Just come back. Stop fighting us. Why do you fight?

because it hurts - it hurts to hurt my friends and strangers -

But they don't matter!

It doesn't matter. We will understand soon. When all of you are no longer **YOU** but **US**.

noteven then. even all the knowledge of my people

and you'll still never learn

But-

But-

We have to!

We have to...

Two worlds as One. Unity of the universes knowledge. That has to be enough to let us understand.

It has to...

AN- It's up to you who the 'human' in this dialogue was- I wrote it with Will in mind but it could fit as any of the flayed or perhaps a human in the future as the hivemind spread over more and more of the human world before El & co stop them

3. Alone

It could feel the real world existed. It could feel that it was the shadow reflection of a real being.

But neither world nor being reached for it.

"You... let us in. And now... you are going to have to let us stay."

AN- Additional warning for canonical character death and spoilers for seasons 2 and 3 and also a few references to the comic of Will's time in the Upside Down

The 'Empties' here are referring to demogorgons and whatever Upside Down creatures there may be. That should be pretty clear but I just wanted to make sure there isn't any extra confusion for what's already probably a confusing chapter

There was this place that it formed in. This empty place.

It was a shallow reflection of the real world. A place it could tell existed. It knew it was real. But it could not find a way to it.

This real world was inhabited by beings. And for every being *there, here* there was an Empty reflection.

Some were tall gray things with faces that split apart. Some were stubbier and mottled and the hard flesh covering their shoulders and upper face could peel back to teeth behind. Some were hunched spindly things with spines all over their rubbery limbs. Some hulked and resembled the growths that dotted this reflecting world. *Trees.*

There were trees there too. And the metal things with the glass window panes that dotted the flat panes of the land and teleported as if in the other world they had been moved.

All evidence that it was right in its hypothesis. But it had no one to talk to about this theory.

The Empties here were just that- nothing more than animals. It

outmatched them in every way. In fact, it found long ago that it could send a part of itself into the creatures and take control from their mindless heads. They would never pose a threat to it.

But they would never fill the hole inside.

Emptiness could not be filled with Empties.

So it lived-no, existed- for forever. It didn't feel alive. It felt suffocated. Because for every feeling it had, for every thought, every emotion, every sense, it had no one that it could share with.

Eventually its power grew. Eventually it looked elsewhere. It found more than the real world. It found other shallow worlds. Other shadow lands that were no doubt the mirrored reflection of another reality.

It had seen these shadow realities and realms and worlds; gods, monsters, hells and paradise. But nothing applied to it. It had no place in those shadow realities. No realm to call home but its own disappointing one. No world it was born on but the empty reflection it formed in. No hells or paradises or beings on any level like itself. So when a creature would let it in, into their lives, their worlds, their realities, it would never leave. It would wait and press its thoughts and feelings and control full force over them in desperation that they could reciprocate.

They never could.

It had a gut feeling that it was a half to a whole. That was the closest description it had to explain the feeling at least. That there was something else out there with real creatures instead of Empties, creatures that thought and experienced the sort of emotions it did, and that there was something out there like it. Its opposite. Or its twin. Its counterpart that it was the hollow clone of. With branching limbs and nerves that saw across the world and whims that controlled the weather.

But where was this mystery being now? This empty world? No.

Here it was the only thing that thought and felt. The Empties

hungered uncontrollably. But there was no sentience behind that.

So for eons and eons of miserable suffocation, it was left without a single other sentient being. No companion to mix shadows with. And yet the instinctive feeling that *there should be* burned and *burned*- did nothing but add to the pain of suffocating in a world of animals.

Maybe its companion was as cold as it was? Or maybe it was warmth where it was ice?

Maybe it would control land like it controlled the sky?

It dreamed of every option. It indulged that gut feeling that something out there *was like it*. Even as it was given no signals from that other reality or that other entity.

It could feel the real world existed. It could feel that it was the shadow reflection of a real being.

But neither world nor being reached for it.

After time passed indiscernably and the world stayed exactly the same dark empty place as it always had, it fell into a lethargy. It stagnated.

Those other worlds it saw could not hope to provide it with any sort of like mind. They had been as empty as this place. They were left even emptier after it had gone through and exhausted every effort to become a part of them. And the Empties would follow the trails it left as it poked through realities fabric to look at other worlds. The Empties would fall into a frenzy at new food. Even they would gradually fade into lethargy as well; none of the shadow worlds that it had found provided them any new tastes. Any real tastes.

It grew to hate its Empties. They did nothing but remind it that real creatures existed. That for every reflection they were stood a real being. And that none of those sentients ever came for it.

Never rescued it.

It later came discover that the name to this feeling was 'bitter'. It

despised the sentients. It despised life. Life never came for it.

Life left it alone, trapped here, left in an empty realm until its mind starved so badly it found itself nothing but a faded shadow pressed against the twisted earth.

There was no way to discern the passage of time here or in any of the other worlds it saw after this empty land spread its dark infection over them. Some had lighter skies that changed colors as time passed. Or did until the infection made it the same dark blue that it was here.

It felt that its time in lethargy was at least as long as its time spent alert.

The change came from an Empty.

The change came with a roar and split and pain/freedom/life like nothing it had ever felt before as in one section of this world reality was gripped and ripped free.

Something had *touched* one of its Empties.

Someone had touched *its* world.

Even in its lethargy, it grabbed that someone. It meshed with them. It saw as much as it could about this new...person. A person.

Not an Empty.

Not one of the other empty 'people' from every world it peeked inside of.

Someone *real*.

They were letting it in.

It started with a boy named Will.

Because they had names. The *humans* did.

Those were what lived in the real realm.

The first few that came in were dragged in by an Empty. Most were eaten by said Empty. It panicked. The hate it felt at the twin world was directed at the animal that was gorging itself on its first real sentience while it lay weak from its eons of inactivity.

But even though it wasn't able to come take the humans from the Empty, it saw enough.

They walked on two legs. They were shaped so similarly to Empties but...

They were *right*.

It was right. The Empties were *wrong*-were nothing more than the twisted reflection of real beings; of these beings. Humans.

This other world was light. It was energy. It had been energy that had reached for it after all this eternity alone. But it was so much more than light. It was physics, biology, warmth, creativity, life.

And it finally was able to bring itself off the disgusting, pale imitation of human ground in time to find Will. It saw what he looked like. What he thought. What he called himself.

Oh it was overwhelming. It was almost too much at once.

There was another one too. Dale. A human hunter. Dale's human body gave out under the teeth of the Empty but his mind was embraced. It held it amongst its own gingerly. Tenderly.

And another one dragged bleeding into this world (and blood. Blood was life. It was warm fluid where it was cold smoke. Blood was real where...where...it was fake).

And then Will. And Will had not died yet. Physically at least. It hovered ready in case Will's body did start to fail. Ready to reach out just as gingerly and hold that young mind among its and Dale's and Shepard's.

It tried to...comfort was the human word (all those feelings, all those emotions that for eons it had no name for it found names for. Or names humans used on emotions that were...close enough to what it

felt). Tried to comfort him. But then more humans had come in. And they had dragged Will away. It wanted to lash out at them. It wanted to destroy them. (It wanted them too).

It never would let go of Will or any human. Never never never.

So it reached for him as its form regained its former strength. But Will ran. It didn't understand why. It tried to tell him to stay. The human could not seem to understand its rumbles.

And finally its form was strong again. The shallow world itself spread as it always did. Crawled through the little rift and made it bigger. The empty world lived and spread its darkness. But it had no reason to stop its growth.

It wanted to keep that rift open. It wanted humans.

It wanted to find what it was a reflection of.

It wanted anything but to be alone again.

Finally Will didn't run. He made noises that it didn't at first understand but Dale's lingering mind supplied the translations for.

Go! Away! Go! Away!

It took the chance and embraced Will too.

Never.

The human flinched away from its words, coming from his own mind.

Never letting you go.

Will struggled to understand what was happening to him. It tried to show him what it was; tried to show him the beautiful, beautiful future. Will could be whatever he wanted here, love whoever he wanted. From Will's mind, it saw the different barriers the humans put up, the ways some saw him, the pressures he felt caged by. It had no such pressure. And it tried to show Will that.

But the boy flinched away from its every word. And eventually it had to steal the functions of the boy's body from him. Otherwise he would have given everything away. Would have ruined everything. Would've helped lock it away again.

Why hadn't its reflection come yet? It didn't mind being the emptier form of whatever the real one was. It didn't. It would tell the other that it didn't- that no bad feelings existed.

Why wasn't it coming to find it yet? Its double wouldn't let these humans try to lock it away. It would help it navigate this new world. This plethora of words/senses/feelings/thoughts. Will provided enough to stall its mind in overwhelmed bliss. But every other human would provide even more.

Will would talk to his family, a human unit it envied the connection of, and friends, another enviable human connection, about it. He tried to comprehend what he was sharing a mind and body with and explain it to his friends. It heard all the words.

That to Will it felt like evil.

That to Will "he likes it cold".

That to Will's mind, it was 'he'.

A fascinating new concept. But that was how humans were; that much it could see from Will. From this boy that humans considered young, it learned of gender, of family, of friends, of companies, of countries- learned words like 'we' and 'us' that put a name to what it had always longed for.

So if it took what Will said of it, if it was a he, then he could find more he's and she's and they could be 'we'. 'Us'. Unity. Company.

Not it and nothing else. Not it all alone. One singular entity in an empty world.

They had let *him* into their world. For the first time, he wasn't alone. So it didn't matter if how he had to live only by spreading was likely to constrict and suffocate the humans and their beautifully alive world. It didn't matter if the empty world was crawling into and

killing this proper realm. It didn't matter if the Empties themselves were flitting in and out of the two realms and devouring unfortunate humans.

It didn't matter to him.

Then Will was gone. Truly gone. The mind he had embraced into himself had been burned away. The heat had seered a damaged injury into their connection.

Why? He wanted to ask Will why he had left him. But Will was gone. Only the crisp burn remained.

The counterpart he believed was out there still made no sign of presence. That stung. On the heels of how Will had left him like that, on the heels of how the very human that had invited him in pressed him out and snapped their worlds bridge close, it stung worse than the stagnating pain of before.

Especially because...he liked humans. He liked that they were sentient. He liked that they had made him a he and called him evil and thought about him. That was so much more than the Empties were even capable of doing. But still-

Still they did not entirely apply to him. Moreso than any of the other reflection creatures. They were as close as he had ever had before to equals, to companions. But someone was still out there. And that someone was ignoring him. Ignoring his pleas.

Fine. Two could play at that game. He would steal every human from under its reach. He would carry them here and they all could be...a unit. That human word- family. He would leave his counterpart alone for once.

He started to work harder. When the humans once again started to use their reality's energy to bridge the way across, he found as many humans as he could to embrace.

As it turned out, 'names' were not concrete or unique to every human. He found this out because the next mind he took was from another

boy named Will. Well, William. But the human didn't think of himself by that name. Because when he was even younger, a child as humans called it, his maternal lifegiver (did he have a lifegiver? Was it his counterpart? Did that being create him and his shallow realm? Or did they merely exist because this true reality did? Did he have a 'mother'?) called him by a different name- Billy.

Just like Will, Billy panicked at his arrival. He tried to take things slower with the new human. Will had known about the Empties and this world, but this new human knew nothing of it. So instead of just pulling him into the same place where Dale and the others rested, he let the human remain in control. He let the human run away from the place he was building himself a real (biological-flesh-blood-life) form.

The form that would let him enter this world. Truly be a part of it. If these creatures did not apply to him, he would apply to them. Maybe then. Maybe then, with a body like they had, with life fluid like they had, with the warm life running through their fleshy veins, he would belong.

After letting Billy run a bit he joined him. Let Billy see his own appearance instead of his shadow form. Let him see the glimpses of the other humans in the back, the hunters, the soldiers, the humans the Empties had killed here but that lived on as a mind.

He had hoped that Billy would be put more on ease by the sight of more humans. Will, after all, had been terrified of his birth form.

Still Billy tried first thing on returning to his home to tell other humans about *him*. To warn them. To flee as far as he could from the growing form below the steel mill.

No, he had told him. And then the control he had let Billy have was stolen just like Will's had eventually been.

It's alright, he reassured, you can have it back.

So long as the body didn't die. But he didn't lie either. Because Billy would always have a body so long as he had a mind.

It was like he told the powerful human that had touched the Empty

at the start of this paradise-

You let us in. And now you're going to have to let us stay.

Billy had let him in. Just as Dale had. Just as Will had. Just as Heather did. Just as they all did.

Now he would *always* be a part of them.

They would live eternal with him. None of them would ever be alone again. They would have to let him stay. And he would let them stay.

Forever.

But then the human had become difficult. Will had done it too- Will had fought and fought and fought. It made no sense. But it had hurt when Will had torn free. He would never go through that isolating experience again. No human would ever burn their way free no matter if they fought or not.

When Billy stopped and stood against him, just like Will had done, frustration snapped inside. He stabbed and stabbed, ripped and tore. And then as the human body gave out, he grabbed at the mind he had already absorbed into themselves (himself, himself- like a human. It- he swore it). Let the mind free in the homeworld; watched it panic and build itself a body out of nothing to provide the comfort of the familiar until the mind was a human by all appearances once more. And then the human looked up at him wide eyed. Collapsed downward.

He felt frustration of a different sort at the unhappiness of his human. But humans weren't meant to be alone. And Will had panicked and shook at the sight of him. The others had done the same in the human realm at his flesh avatar (that he built only so they could see- so that they, and so that *it*, wherever it was, could see that he could be a part of their world) even though he tried to tell them not to move, tried to tell them that moving would hurt them. He didn't want them hurt. He just wanted them to join him. They didn't listen to the advice and wiggled and caused themselves pain. Humans didn't listen.

It irked him.

But now was not the time. None but Will, and he had been disconnected from their unit, had a human body left. Now they were with him here. Just minds and souls in unity. Near unity.

So he tried to show that to them all. He sent every mind out to do as Billy had done and build an avatar of their own. He watched them all do so until the group was huddled close together and in the process of realizing that their 'bodies' crushed against each other were not giving off any body warmth.

Warmth was dangerous. Now that they were all here instead of their homeworld, he could protect them from it. From everything dangerous.

The real world of energy and life and thought was a world of pain, of painful elements like fire, of human rules that led to their own deaths at each others hands. He could keep them from that.

See? He told them with their language. *See?*

They didn't seem to. Heather threw everything her avatar could pick from the ground at his smoky manifestation. Doris continuously walked away even though he always teleported her back to the clearing when she would near the forest- the Empties couldn't harm her or any of them now that their physical bodies were gone, most likely, but he could not take that chance. Tom held Janet until both gave up to stand close to their daughter and join her in throwing useless debris at him. Adam did nothing but cry. Will had been a little older than the little boy; would Will cry once he found him and embraced him once more, once he took him here? Home?

But- But- Every human had an ideal. A home, one they either had or once had or always dreamed of. Why weren't they happy here with him at home?

Why couldn't they just be happy?

Every one of them split apart into shattered smoke in his frustration. Then he formed them all again.

Family, he announced, *Us. We. Family*.

The reactions were varied in different human displeasures. He screeched.

Stop! It's better! Everything is better! We aren't alone anymore!

Billy gave him a nonsense gesture that humans held a special negative connotation for. The human yelled up at him, cursed him, and then Heather was doing the same, until every one of his 'companions' did it.

He vanished.

And reappeared far away- back in the spot where he had lain for millennia in agonizing lethargy.

A part of his power remained behind to keep any of the Empties from entering the clearing with the human minds and that kept those minds contained in that spot. They were still a part of him- he could still feel every one and hear every thought.

But he shut the noise off. The hate. The grief.

They hated him.

And he hated them.

They weren't what he wanted them to be. They weren't behaving. They didn't stay calm. They weren't enthusiast as he discovered a new word for every emotion he had always been confused over. They didn't smile at him like they smiled at each other- none felt pride as he discovered what it was like to have sentient company for the first time.

It wasn't right- they still didn't apply to it. It-no, *he*, (he like a human) still was not happy. Still lonely. Even with these. But these did not want to be here. Some missed others. Just like Will had missed his family and friends to much to accept his company. If those were here as well...

But perhaps these ones would never be happy. Perhaps he'd always

feel alone with them.

That would be unacceptable. That would hurt almost as badly as if he had never discovered them in the first place.

No, they couldn't get rid of him that easily.

He would embrace every human. They would know eternity. They would be together. They would no longer be separated from their 'loved ones'. They would no longer be in danger ever again.

Even if every single human in the world never quite filled up the emptiness inside of him.

Perhaps out there somewhere was an entity like him.

Maybe someday he could find it. Wrap his tendrils around its. Be the shadow to its light or join together in smoke if they both were creatures of darkness.

But if that other being was out there in this world that felt *whole* where his home world felt *empty*, it hadn't sent any signals to greet him or show it existed.

Not even as it embraced more humans.

Not even as it weathered more of Billy and the others taunts and hate.

Not even as his infected world crawled further into the whole, living world.

Wherever his counterpart was, it was keeping away from him.

So even with every new human-

Even with the fact that it now had bridged that gap far enough for it to never leave the world they had let it into-

Even with...even with...

He was still alone.

Still nothing but a reflection.

Still *Empty*.

AN- The descriptions of the other Empties come from concept art for the demogorgon, as seen in all their beauty here:

..?w=316&h=447&crop

For now, this is marked as complete but most likely it will be visited with new additions to these three different AUs so if you enjoyed this keep an eye out for more :D

Again, be sure to check out IceCreamRaven's Eldritch over on AO3 for more Mind Flayer oneshots!

About the title- All for One & One for All was a phrase made famous by the Three Musketeers and so comes from there, just like Dart's name did. All for One is in reference for parasiteMF's hunger for everything (so in other words, the way It sees things are that 'all' worlds/people/minds are for 'one' aka Itself). One for All is in reference to how the hivemindMF has one central mind, the 'One' that unifies the 'all' that it takes in. One is in reference to how aloneMF is, literally, alone (so in other words, it's all on its own and that makes it just One entity alone)

4. Bonus 1- Adieu

"What would an ocean be without a monster lurking in the dark? It would be like sleep without dreams."

The monsters were inevitable-
So he had made a deal with them.

AN- Fluff.

Sort of?

A more hopeful conclusion to #2 (HIVEMIND), that assumes that The Human in that chapter was Will

An optional followup to that storyline (hence the 'bonus' in the title)

Quote comes from Werner Herzog

Warnings- minor language, major character death both mentioned and discussed (this is still a lighter chapter than any of the three main ones)

Sirens rang into the night. The noise faded into harmony with other city sounds. They weren't of importance to him; not unless they were ringing out for his guest.

But no. Those years were done.

Emergency services didn't get called on them anymore. Mostly because they stayed out of human eye so much.

It wasn't that they posed a danger

-though they most certainly did inherently-

but that humanity did not in general enjoy their presence.

He shifted with a grunt. The soft lounge chair protested at the movement almost as much as the weakened body.

Across the flat was a silhouette in the opened doorway. The keycode locking it from the outside had been unlocked without him even noticing.

Damn. He was losing his observation skills with each year that

passed.

Although a part of missing the door's unlocking and opening just came from how often he drifted off.

And he had always drifted off- dreaming wasn't a trait that had come with old age. It had always been a part of him.

Now, with the dreaming cut off, he had moved to see what his uninvited visitor looked like.

Not who they were. He already knew that.

In the low lighting of the apartment, it was almost easy to mistake the visitor as human.

But even without the nagging feeling that preceded the door, the goosebumps on his neck, he would recognize the figure was not.

Dark blue orbs that moved like thick liquid trapped in the shape of a human eye. They had no pupils, no iris, no whites, and yet he still felt as if they were directed straight at him.

-straight *into* him-

The figure took a few halting steps further into the apartment until it hunched over the countertop the separated the entrance from the lounge beyond.

Neither spoke. The silence descended, awkward, expected, comfortable.

The one light on in the living room revealed a few features of the guest and illuminated his own face; the white hair, the grayed beard, the shaking.

"You look like your...character."

The guest spoke first; the voice was subtly wrong. Just as the feminine figure was. It had been a woman that this body had been born belonging to.

But just as its form and eyes suggested, there were new residents now.

The human laughed, although it was light in effort to hold off coughing. It was genuinely amusing to him that they still remembered that imaginary figure that had helped him through the hardest times.

"Will the Wise. I haven't heard of him in a while now."

"Hmm," they drifted a gray finger over the counter. Felt it.

But made no move to come further into the apartment.

"*Th e c i ty?*"

The inhuman voice perked in inflections that should not have been there.

At least they were trying inflections out now. The monotone had been hopelessly unnerving.

"When a human gets old," he cracked a smile again, "It's hard to live somewhere that wouldn't have help come quickly. And also. There aren't many alternatives."

Because of you went unsaid. Will didn't want to bring bad blood back to the surface. The world had changed because of the creature standing in his entryway. Humanity had changed. Technology, relationships, geography-

But he was still here. Alone in his own mind.

And millions of other humans were as well.

So let a mega city be the only option for housing. Let each door be locked.

He wouldn't lock them out. Because that bad blood was in the past. There had been fights and struggles and pain. But so long as they had backed away from destroying every humans mind and body, he was able to look past everything that creature had ruined for him.

Even past the dead.

His mom hadn't been able to do that so easily.

She had watched Bob Newby be mauled.

But Will had felt it happen.

And so long as he could keep it from happening again, he was able to forgive.

To forgive and to guide.

Another siren rang out as the first dimmed away. They were never ending here. The urban lullaby.

Wrinkled hands pressed against the arms of the chair. In a few seconds of cricks and grunts, he had stood back up. Passing into the kitchen, a finger flicked out and pressed the lights above the counter top on to their dimmest setting.

Brightness hurt his eyes.

And bright lights still generated warmth.

His guest didn't like warmth.

"What are you doing here?" Will finally found the counter with his own hands. All his weight pressed up against it as he stared across at the blank face.

"We are here to speak one last time."

"Oh," he let out.

They didn't press. After another pause, he prompted for more.

"Your timing is good."

How strange it was to joke about death. The reaper stood close by him though. And the human had become accustomed to its presence.

For a few minutes more they passed on time in the same manner. The

human and his personal demon, one speaking and then the other following soon after.

Decades earlier and Will would've wanted nothing more than to never talk to the creature again.

But speaking to them had become a critical part in getting them to back off from the conquest they'd sought.

So he had made a deal with his monsters.

A life where they could visit at any time, speak again, take more humans (only the willing-only the willing, he had to remind himself constantly), and he could not run from that.

He had to stand his ground. He had to speak when no other human wished to.

It was the only way to protect his family, his friends, his world.

Even if it meant that he couldn't run in the opposite direction from the monster and never see it again.

The night ticked on.

The city's noises were a muted cacophony.

And *they* pitched one last offer.

"We could take you."

Will admittedly considered it.

"You would n't have to die. Your wisdom could live on."

But after that silence of consideration, he moved to stare straight into the inhumans' fluid eyes.

"Mortals...well, they're mortal. They die." Slowly, he shook his head until it looked down at the counter top. Eyelids drooped. Wiry hair fell over his face. His guests borrowed expression remained blank.

"My mom is gone. My brother. My family," weathered brown eyes

rose again, "I'll join them again."

"You will be dead."

"Yes."

Gray hands tensed slightly where they rested on the counter separating them from the human. For what may be the last time, he took in the appearance of his monster. Of the beings that haunted him even into his old age.

Took in that blank face that hadn't bothered to master human expressions. A face lacking in malice.

Malice he had long left behind himself.

"You do not know you will be with our family again," they spoke again.

"No I don't," Will cracked a smile, "But I do know that I cannot live forever without them."

At the small silence that enveloped the flat, he shook his head softly.

"You don't understand do you?"

Cobalt orbs stared back unblinkingly.

"We don't have to."

See? Fluff

Or as close to fluff as I get with these characters :)

5. Bonus 2- σκιά (PT 1) (Discovery)

"Normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly."

νέος makes a discovery

A prequel to Parasite, consisting of multiple chapters as a bit of a Halloween week special.

This is chock full of xenobiology and if any of it is too confusing I'll try to reword those parts

Any grammar/spelling/pronoun/blatant science errors you spot I'd love for you to point out for me so I can edit them out

Remember when the demogorgon in season 1 opened the lock on the Byers front door with its mind? In this verse all the demo family and the shadow monster (and the Mind Flayer itself which as seen in Parasite is a different entity) are psychics of varying levels- the average demo would be less powerful than El so a little thing like a lock being opened is easy but closing the Gate (S2) would be out of (most) of their leagues

Enjoy!

What was the worst false-memory they had felt? The /dreams/ of theirs or the mortals that lived in this world stayed tame. They stayed full of comforting darkness and the peaceful memories shared by all.

But a flash of unnerving imagination streaked through the minds of the denizens at times. None of them could help it; they were mortals.

And mortals dreamed.

σκιά dreamed.

They did not consider themselves a mortal. They had yet to die. They had no flesh- only a manifestation of storm and shadow. Those under their protection had bodies of flesh that eventually shut down system after system. At this eventual failure of functions, brood siblings

traditionally met in one spot and awaited the death shared by all those born of the same Nesting they had been. σκιά would attend the event; they would splinter their shadow to join with every mind fully and that would be the end. Once σκιά's reach engulfed a mortal mind completely that mind was unable to stay on its own amongst the swirling storm of the beings mind and power. And in exchange, each brood-sibling fell lifeless to the ground amidst the resonating peace of their guardian.

During this ceremony, σκιά's memory bank grew. Each time, a new set of /dreams/ was added.

Some flights of fancy.

Some fights with fear.

None were able to truly unsettle σκιά.

None were able to prepare σκιά.

The visitor was young. Its body was lanky and shook with every step towards them.

Its moniker was νέος. They knew so before it even reached their location. νέος's stood beneath their shadow by the physical body of ἐμπιστος, the one they had long trusted. ἐμπιστος was unlike the others. It had existed long before most of the currently living cycles. That mind was unique- every inhabitant of this shadow world was psychic. But ἐμπιστος was especially strong. When its first body died, ἐμπιστος was not lost in the ensuing assimilation. It was renewed in a new larva at its original birth Nest. And when that larva grew into another weak physical body that eventually died as well, ἐμπιστος replayed the scenario.

σκιά had long known ἐμπιστος. Every time the scientists mind was engulfed amongst their own, their bond grew stronger. Now, the friend rarely walked from its body's place under their shadows except to find a Vine to renew from. While its body lay dormant inside or under the smoke, ἐμπιστος's mind and σκιά's melded and reached across their world while never physically moving at all.

This young one could not reach far. It had been unable to reach either of them with the panic it so desperately felt.

σκιά asked it what was. They reached out a tendril and touched the panicking mind.

-glimpses-

-glimpses of death-

/CONFUSION/ and /TERROR/

Who did this? σκιά asked gently as the sensation of smelling blood and feeling broken bodies passed through them from νέος.

We-we do not know. We do not know what happened. No, the newcomer shivered. Its mind reached out for them and let itself rest among them all briefly to calm from its /FEAR/.

We felt-we felt- someone came into our region. They smelt like us. They felt like us. But they were wrong. We reached for them and they were not connected.

σκιά settled closer to the spiky ground (it could not hurt them, of course; such ground was merely physical where they were not and had never been).

I haven't felt anyone that walks among us but is not part of us, the being admitted to the visitor.

We could not feel them either, νέος denied, *Not until they came near. Not until...*

They...were eating. Eating one of the young. Devouring one of us.

That was curious. And, of course, horrifying. They did not eat each other; all of them shared much of each other to others but never their life flesh. And they hadn't felt this atrocity happening- they didn't feel an abnormal snap, didn't feel a vengeful spirit, didn't feel any hint of this story νέος was telling.

Where did this happen? they floated down towards νέος. On the

ground, ἐμπιστος reached up to feel them. The trusted one was /WORRIED/. σκιά pulsed out reassurance and felt the physical body of their friend relax from its stress.

νέος's head opened; a rare sight to see on any of them. The young one was /CONCERNED/. /STRESSED/. Like they had for ἐμπιστος, they sent out soothing frequencies until νέος's head had closed once more. Then and only then did the young one answer.

At our Nest.

The world had drifted through the void and found a new reality to latch to. It had seemed uniform enough. Their shadows took shape into the cystraline landscape and grew over its dark version they dwelt in. The new realm wasn't hurt by the action; in fact, from what σκιά could tell, the worlds they joined to didn't know their shaded double existed.

It drifted naturally from realm to realm. σκιά had known this life for as long as they lived.

Their world shed its skin and took on a new one annually. During the times of absolute darkness, as it moved through the void, σκιά brought their shadows down over the whole world and engulfed its populace in safety. The young did not enjoy the void; but, with σκιά's presence always there, they did not wail too often.

The current skin changed while they were latched onto it; objects moved, buildings fell, terrain morphed. It happened often enough, to see the template realm's changes reflected in their own, that neither σκιά or the others were concerned.

Now, as σκιά hovered over the twisted remains of the subternal Nest, they wondered if they should have been. If they should have noticed those changes.

If those changes, somehow, inexplicitly, carried over to their shadow world.

What could have done this... ἐμπιστος felt out in a mixture of subdued

/AWE/ and /HORROR/. The feelings were returned by σκιά themselves.

We do not know, νέος shook, We saw very little. Only one of the young turning on another and mauling it. Only someone we did not feel out completely coming in and devouring the larva.

The idea was startling. To see one of their own kind massacring and desecrating another- and cut off from /them/ as well.

As if they had lost their sentience and become an animal.

No. σκιά wouldn't allow any of their people to degrade in that way. They would get to the bottom of this.

ἐμπιστος looked up at them physically while doing the same with its mind. It was startled. They pulsed reassurance once more. The air around them crackled. A rising storm, attuned to their will and mood, announced the severity of this mystery situation to their trusted friend and the shaking young one.

Their head stretched down until their mass was almost touching the ruined Nest.

Torn bodies. Black blood.

Larva ripped in half, in pieces; caretakers similarly mauled. The amount of waiting vines laying ruined on the ground, disconnected with their hosts, betrayed that there had been far more larva born at this Nest than what were left now. Whoever- no, whatever (neither they nor any of their people would dare touch each other in this way)- had done this had dragged some of their...meals...into the sharp canyons and caves of rubble beyond the Nest.

The light above σκιά brightened; matched the color of the rarely seen gums in the usually closed mouths of their denizens.

I'll find what did this, they swore to the mortals standing below.

The storm crackled with the promise.

There was no sign of passing time. They simply knew it did.

It had been half of a cycle before anything stirred at the nest. The crater lay still with its grisly ground cover. σκιά let themself rest against the slimy crags of metal until their shadow matched with the darkness of their world.

And there they waited.

It would have been a lie to say they weren't confident that whatever animal had done this would be dealt with quickly and easily. σκιά had seen monsters before; twisted minds made dangerous by their innate psychic abilities each larva was born from.

Most often, they were the result of a quirk. A flaw. The vines responsible for creating the deadly creature were reformatted.

And most often they had a flaw that proved fatal for them: they were proud. Their brains viewed the world as one that revolved around themselves and felt their psychic powers would prove stronger than any of the 'nonpersons' taking up 'space' in 'their world'.

Well, σκιά didn't let that misconception continue long. They would bring their storms to the culprit and show how only a small bit of their power could fracture a mortal mind completely.

It wasn't something they liked doing. But σκιά knew that, fundamentally, they would protect their people. They would protect the denizens of this shadow world.

Any danger that arose would be dealt with either by death or by assuming control over the offending body.

Any denizens who were killed before they had that chance weighed on σκιά's consciousness forever.

Time passed.

Cycles, eons, lifetimes, eternities- with sporadic reasons for guilt spread apart enough time to dull the pain.

They had let themself fall into confidence born of experience.

Nothing born of the lifegiving vines of this world could match their strength.

And, although this shadow world took on the skin of realms and realities unknown, they had never met anyone born outside this world.

There was a wet crunch. It was followed by another. Again and again- steps on the slimy ground of webs and roots.

σκιά remained still. The sky around them remained peacefully dark and free of their storms.

The steps continued to draw nearer; whatever this was, it had not realized the guardian was waiting for it.

Crunch.

σκιά reached out. There was no mind there to greet their reach.

But there was *something* .

Approaching the ruined Nest was not one of their interconnected denizens.

Approaching it was *emptiness*- a black void where their sight of the world was inexplicably unreadable.

The hole drew nearer. Its approach timed with every physical crunch.

In the shards spiralling up and carving down, the figure finally appeared.

The mortals of this world walked upright. They spent more time reaching for each other's minds then physically moving. They received sustenance from the tubes of a feeding vine instead of using the hidden mouths they had to eat.

This thing wore the skin of one of them.

But it sulked forward on all fours. Its movements were jerky,

unnatural- as if it were a larva just learning to move instead of an adult.

Its head hung open and flapped, that unused maw no longer hidden.

σκιά had first felt the uneasy suspicion when they saw the massacre in the Nest, an animal. An animal wearing the skin of one of their people.

σκιά reared upward. The creature jolted to a stop. Its wide open head faced upwards and smelled the rage coming from the angry guardian.

And then, despite all certainty that it was a mindless animal, the creature let its own emotions surge forth.

σκιά could feel them. They were tainted, stained with the same emptiness that made this thing so unexpected; but they were there.

And it was /AMUSED/.

'`s_O`/

The voice grated at their mind. Whenever they had seen one of the mortals revert into a monster, they had never /talked/. Never had the ability to form words.

This one's words could barely be called such. They were wrong. Hard to decipher. Harder still to interpret.

But they were *intelligent* words.

't/e~IL` ,mE the empty mind reached out against theirs again.

And this time, σκιά felt more than the voided empty spot standing in their world.

They felt the cold. The darkness so unlike the comforting shadows of their land. They felt the /HUNGER/.

w(H`o wOu|D _YyyO`u _ l3e;?

σκιά spread further outwards. Their form stretched larger and

menaced over the one singular figure.

It was a storm against one small mortal form, as small as all the others here they had long spent their time with.

And still, even with everything empirically promising that the creature was outmatched, σκιά felt that unease grow.

Aa.r`e yyyo`u _dum`l3;? that same /AMUSEMENT/ filtered off the slight form. There were black stains on its ridged skin.

Dried blood.

Its head flapped open further lazily. Feeling out for them. Smelling. Reading what σκιά exuded.

They flowed down until their head hovered above the sick stench of murder rolling off the form on the ground.

Did you do this? they asked though they knew the answer. Their smell betrayed every larva and adults death here was from this creatures claws and maw. Their scents remained inside the skinny form; this one had eaten the others.

That still did not explain why the larva had turned on eachother. It still offered no answers to νέος's fears.

l|ke`~iT;? the stitled voice sent waves of cold through their form. It was /MIRTH/. It was mocking. Mocking them and their question.

Mocking the dead that it had ripped to pieces.

σκιά had had enough. The flashing of the storm about fell psychedelically on both the giant guardian and the bloodstained animal disguised as a mockery of one of their own people.

Their limbs stretched and then spiralled forward. Forward and forward all the while their mind pressed down on the beast with surprising resistance.

That empty, hungry mind pressed back. It was stronger than any of those defuncts that had psychically pressed back on them.

It was stronger than ἐμπιστος, the strongest being σκιά had met in their long lifetime.

Then the resistance stilled and slid aside. The murderers body convulsed and fell dead from the attack from their limbs.

Its mind did not.

Its mind was not there to do so.

The dark thing was gone. The brain of this mortal was only evidenced by small scatterings.

The creature itself had been braindead long before the time νέος reported the first attacks on the Nest had began.

The unknown scent arrived once more from the center of the Nesting crater. One small corpse slid up on to small deformed legs briefly. Emanating from the body came the voice again. Indecipherably formed words sent outwards towards them. A foriegn feeling like / GLEE/. Then the thing retreated away into the ground until σκιά could no longer feel its presence.

What was the worst false-memory they had felt?

A flash of unnerving imagination streaked through the minds of the denizens at times. None of them could help it; they were mortals.

And mortals dreamed.

σκιά dreamed.

They were not mortal. They had never considered themself as such.

But they still succumbed to the imagination.

When the new mind disappeared among their world without so much as a physical trace, σκιά dreamed.

Uneasy thoughts. Unsettled emotions. A mood that even after a mindmeld ἐμπιστος could not decipher.

They had never seen any of the beings living in the worlds their shadow realm copied. They had not paid heed to how their current skin had fallen to ruin.

Not until the first Nest was devoured by their own kind.

Not until it felt that other-other-/thing/.

Now σκιά dreamed.

Never before had they felt anything new. Never before had there been a killer they couldn't handle.

Now there was an alien mind hiding unreachable in their world.

And now they felt the very anxiety they had chalked down to being a mortal trait.

AN- Quote is by Charles Addams. It is used here to open a main theme of this chapter- this is the meeting of two fundamentally different beings. Both have their own 'normal'. For MF that would be consuming everything it can (and being a dick about it). For σκιά it would be protecting the inhabitants of the Upside Down. It may be normal for one of them but for the alien it's fundamentally impossible to grasp and thus empathize

"Dumb" was being used with the meaning 'mute' aka speechless in mind

6. Bonus 2 σκιά (Part 2) (Victories- Pt 1)

σκιά believes they will be the one to finally defeat the parasite. It had told them they were the strongest advanced it had ever come across, had it not?

It wasn't as if it would lie, right?

Their first meeting had been at that first nest. σκιά had returned to their people and, though troubled, began to try to decipher what had happened.

ἐμπιστος was the one who pinned the name of the creature. It had listened to different scientists and elders discuss what σκιά had felt from the thing. After the second encounter and the third, σκιά came back with more information.

Rarely did those they went out with come back with information.

They rarely came back at all.

This thing could take them. Shred them apart.

And so ἐμπιστος had called them the word. And σκιά had accepted it with disgust.

The same disgust directed at the *parasite* itself.

Lo`Ok at yo_U.

The thing, or things as it were now, looked up at them as one. Six fully grown bipeds on all fours on the slimy ground. All six covered in black blood from their cannibalistic feasts. σκιά had been forced to tell their denizens to move away from the first nest to be infected. The creature's infection spread from the ruined nest to nearby coves and feeding spots. Young were easily picked off and dragged away into the dark crags.

It spoke as one entity. An entity that was learning to speak far more

smoothly than it had in their first confrontation.

It may look at them from six separate bodies, but all moved in impossible unison.

σκιά was one body with a multitude of minds within their reach.

The parasite was as many forms as it stole with one mind.

They didn't deign to respond to the thing still speaking like an infantile larva...or at least a malicious one that spoke, despite the stilted method, with dark intelligence rivalling their own.

Instead, σκιά reared down on them. The bodies did not stand against the energy of their storm. Its voice pealed at them from the ground, from the vines, from the air- and then vanished under the increased pressure of the now swirling storm.

The corpses were gently nuzzled and then carried back to safer ground.

Possessed or not, all σκιά's dead required respect.

The first Nest was nearly impossible to reach now. σκιά knew they were powerful, but they still felt mental pressure that was overwhelming as they tried to fly to the place.

But for a tense, miserably alien span of time since the nightmare began, the infection had not spread out to another vital place.

Of course that changed. Everything was changing now.

σκιά, a creature of habit, a being that had long lived in static, was coping admirably well with this.

They had kept it back. Fought and won. Fought and won.

Until the time it got away.

The ceot Nest, a large and more centralized birthing place than that νέος had lost, joined the infection.

Hosted the parasite.

That was forty larva lost. Twenty caretakers. Fifty birthing vines infected and ruined.

And yet the worst part was that σκιά felt elated.

Because as it grew ambitious and spread this far, the parasite left its trail visible.

The trail felt like the entity. An empty residue, a blankness- *sickness* . σκιά felt it. They spread along the path, taking care not to touch it. Doing so would no doubt signal it and they did not care to feel that mental pain from battling attempted /possession/. The trail shaped itself in the air and ground oddly. Circular. They wondered why. But they had no desire to ask.

The /feel/ made them expect that the patterns *were it*. That, since the parasite merely wore the skin of its hosts but the creature itself was no one of them (no more than their shadows were the worlds they drifted to and wore the skin of), so this circular pattern imprinted in reality was the monster itself. This was how σκιά comprehended it. Beyond the metaphor, they could not *know* what it was they were protecting their world from.

They reached the end of the trail.

And they felt their own amusement grow.

ἐμπιστος reached for them when their shadows coalesced by it.

Good news? it asked. σκιά's limbs surrounded its physical body and felt their friend meld with their mind.

Often times, σκιά wished there were more that could withstand a full meld. At each of their deaths, the mortals' minds melded with theirs. But they were lost in the process- σκιά's mind grew, but they gained no individual companions from it...they merely *grew*.

A trail? It made to confirm. σκιά pulsed out /HOPE/.

Yes. And I can cut that trail off.

If anyone can, ἐμπιστος exerted /PRIDE/, it would be you.

Their next conversation was less ecstatic.

And that made both σκιά and ἐμπιστος /DISAPOINTED/. In eachother, in themselves.

But it was the lack of belief that started the spat.

You know me! σκιά spun in the air around the singular figure. ἐμπιστος's blank face did nothing- no twitch, no show of teeth (in every birth and rebirth, ἐμπιστος never showed that mortal mouth. It was barely intuned to its own body after all)

If I say I cut it off, I would think you'd trust me!

They had encapsulated the trail. They had exerted every ounce of power.

They watched the nether spots grow, those left as scars from erasing parts of their world.

But oh it was worth it to shut that fearful voice off.

Their people were /SAFE/.

We do, ἐμπιστος eased smoothly, But we know how worried you were about this creature. It is dangerous. It still could be.

σκιά knew they weren't angry at their friend. They were angry because they were on edge. They had been on edge for as long as the parasite was here.

I will look.

They did. They exerted their mind past reality's phase to look into the realm their world rested as a double of.

It was ruined. At its dead heart rested a circular structure of shards and sick light and pulsations. It was a being; like themself. Like the parasite.

σκιά could not feel the parasite by looking in.

έμπιστος wanted more. It wanted to scout. To send mortals in to look instead of the brief stare.

They denied it. The parasite was gone. They had defeated it.

They had, after all, exerted every damn ounce of their power to cut it off.

That had to be enough.

It wasn't just pride, though that most certainly was a factor; it was the underlying despair.

If...If my full strength would not be enough to stop it, and that possibility is the only reason to send scouts to that place, then...then there is no winning. There is no victory.

σκιά...έμπιστος pulled them closely, slowly, *if it was not, then we will simply have to try a method that is not based in your brute strength. And we will think of one. But one of those methods could be to leave. To leave this realm, this world, our world, behind. To migrate to one we would be the aliens in; but we would be safe from the monster in. And scouting that world would be a chance to scout for a new one.*

It's gone, σκιά wheedled, it's gone.

έμπιστος opened completely; opened until it was entirely visible to / feel/ and σκιά did just so, pushing its tendrils in and feeling the peaceful embrace.

In an echo of σκιά's earlier words, έμπιστος pushed forward / KNOWINGLY/. *Do you trust us?*

Yes! they said immediately, *Always. Forever.*

It was that which tempted σκιά to set aside their pride and send

scouts.

The chance never came.

It struck something far more vulnerable than a nest this time.

One of many rings- a bio research ring- dropped from the /MIND/. Their usually present mental presences became holes in their grasp.

Holes- empty, missing, *sick*,- spaces.

It was back. And it had taken more than larva this time.

σκιά was grateful ἐμπιστος was not the type to gloat. The trusted one instead had busied itself. It focused on logistics, on aid, on a response to the new nightmare.

When the parasite first came, it had taken mortals and eaten their kind with their stolen forms. This time, it took the vines. The internal system created and maintained by their bioscience experts.

It had taken the mortals food.

σκιά spread and searched for untouched fungi and fungal eggs. When a spot that was rich with the food of mortals early years was found, they sent teams to retrieve the sustenance.

Some did not return.

σκιά would go with them for protection, but their focus was spread thin over many at-risk nests.

Slowly, though, they made progress. They pushed it back. Constricted its area.

Deja Vu.

This time, σκιά had to change their options.

It was humiliating.

Absolutely, disgustingly, sickeningly humiliating.

Every space of ground it flew over hammered those thoughts in. Every part of *ókiá* wanted to turn around. The mere idea of what they were doing repulsed them at their core-

And wh`O's here Now? I thoughttt you sAid you didn't want to SEE mee.

They hated that voice. They wanted to push down all their / PRESSURE/ on the parasite hurting their people. They wanted to fight and kill.

Don't be insufferably cocky. I am here for a bargain.

BaRgain. BargAin. It mulled over the word, translating its meaning.

Then the mortal body on the ground began to shake with amusement. Flaps hung open lazily.

Bargain? With mE?

It was reaching out. Trying to feel out their mind. *ókiá* stomped out the offending mental tendrils and its hope that it could easily their mind and form right now.

What do you want?

whAt does an`y wanT? it mocked. The physical form pranced boldly into the shadow of their own presence.

FoOD. Companyy. RevengE.

They had always been good at reading lies. Even with the offtone mental voice of the parasite, they could hear the hollowness of the claim.

*For what? *ókiá* spat.*

The parasite cocked the head it wore. The action splayed the entire mouth.

Being obstinate with me, I suppose. Or just... being .

I can't bargain with so base a motive.

my darliNg σκιά , and here it butchered the name of the guardian it stole from its hosts mind, you cAn't bargain with me at all.

Instead of replying, σκιά felt outward. They felt it in the body beneath them, in the vines, in the ground, in the air. There were those circles again. Its form-

No.

σκιά could feel something under that pattern. Something indistinguishable. Something so far from corporeal that even they, being psychic being of storms and shadow, could not grasp what.

Oh... The parasite became /ENTERTAINED/ in its empty, indiscernible way. Are you~lOoking for me?

σκιά swelled outwards. This passive talking grated at them. The parasite was offering no respect at all- no respect to them , to the lord of storms, to their position is guardian and strongest of this world.

I saw you, σκιά thundered, I looked into your world and saw you. You're weak, barely pulsing, stretched too thin-

Do you think I havE only stretched to this world? The parasite cut off darkly. I am not طاقة, wasted and dying in your neighboring world. Oh no. No nO no. I've gone to a millennia of realities, taken eveRything, and never grown weaker. طاقة was m~erel'y a strong host but by no means the strongest I've taken nor the strongest I will.

And the dark. The dark surrounded them. The dark infecting their world, not just its inhabitants-

σκιά believed it. The storm around them faltered and sputtered weakly.

It jumped on the weakness; its hunger for them, their storm their mind their everything, was palpable in the action.

σκιά pushed back and the parasite retreated; there, they thought in spite, I can take you. Keep on trying I dare you.

This world is still willing to bargain, they spoke although they felt the humiliation rush through them again, Just tell us what you want. I could compris-

You, it spoke in a tone that twisted the already broken voice of the stolen form on the ground to darker coldness, **You are the advanced here. Who do you think I want?**

Why me? σκιά asked despite themself.

What's there nOt to want? the voice grew amused again. **Your form is perfect for me. Your world is perfect- your speech, this 'tElepathy', is perfect for me. And you. You are stronger than طاقة. You are/_more powerful than any being I have come across.**

That was what stopped it. That phrasing. That idolizing prose.

The strength they had being confirmed; no. No, it was the news that this parasite had visited countless worlds but admitted they were the strongest being it had come across.

σκιά dispersed from the scene and flew to the Central Nest.

Because now they had a hope.

And they knew, they just knew (every mortal here relied on them knowing and being right in this instance) that they would be the one to defeat the creature.

The idea came and σκιά determined to make it work.

But the mortals did not want to evacuate central. They did not want it to come infect the heart of their world.

ἐμπιστος's words had pushed them over. Their companion had said that leaving this place, the place they'd always lived in, would be preferable to losing themselves to the infection.

Now ἐμπιστος felt for them with unease, unease towards their excitement and frenzied commands, but passive trust that its guardian knew their reasons.

Move! σκιά pushed again. The mortals did not.

Likely, we all could appreciate a reason, ἐμπιστος said calmly, *this is a rapid move to make.*

We're moving because I see it as our greatest option, the guardian avoided.

Still the people didn't move. Not until σκιά fractured, splintered off and sent each splinter to the closed heads of those nearby. The shadow slid through the cracks of skin and to the brains beyond. Each fracture motioned forward the movement of the unresisting mortals.

ἐμπιστος stared at the /control/ with passive acceptance.

It was not until they had moved the entire populace to the border of central that ἐμπιστος reached out again. It rose until it connected to them.

Why?

There is something strange about that monster, they answered as they swirled around it, *And I do not trust that it can't /hear/ us.*

So σκιά did not begin to explain; not until those they needed were with them.

And then they let each space between their shadow limbs function as a guard to keep the parasite from reaching in to spy.

And they were there- σκιά, ἐμπιστος, centrals scientists and dimensional clerics; those that would ready the drift preparation at the start of a cycle.

It wasn't time.

But σκιά would make it be.

It didn't take long for the parasite to move in.

It spread, that circular motion moving through it all and towards the waiting prize.

The feast.

And σκιά, dissipated around the limbs of the central nest, waited.

Waited until its presence had entered the trap entirely.

And then they moved.

Ἐμπιστος had also given them the idea here- that even if their brute strength had not killed it or cut its trail off, they could trap it in a different way.

σκιά's strength would keep it contained. And it did- it did. The parasite reared every host up and threw them against the barrier σκιά had summoned. They kept it strong, no matter how much flesh and the ground itself was shoved against it. The clerics began. The land around them morphed. σκιά could feel the living young begin their panic. They sent what little they could to the populace to / CALM/ them. The shadows grew entirely black. All except those in the barrier. Those still attached to the broken world of shards.

No ! The thing pounded against the barrier. σκιά let themself twist in a brief show of vindictive amusement. And then the black engulfed them all; all but that trapped in what had once been the heart of their world.

The world they had always swore to protect. Had...had they? Had they managed this time?

It didn't appear. Its *wrong* voice did not echo in their head. Every feel of it dissipated, shoved away, was gone-

They waited until every trace of it was vanished. The world continued to settle into its new form. The blackness of the void was gone and the parasite with it.

As one, their minds began to cheer.

7. Bonus 2 σκιά (Part 2) (Victories- Pt 2)

σκιά learns of nightmares

Extra warning for violence; the violence itself remains rather vague just as the previous chapters, it's just more prevalent here

Also MF is a dick. (But you already knew that by now)

It was a wonderful time. Their world was busy while they drifted, but spirits were high. There were festivities, melds, and honors bestowed on their guardian-

None of which quite compared to embracing ἐμπιστος. And even that was not a full meld, not while they had to drift. σκιά was forced to keep everything together and their mind had yet to return every fragment to their shadow form for completion. Until they could do so, their fragmented self made due with the comfort offered in incompletely melding with their friend.

They oversaw building while the drifting continued. Scientists were making progress on clearing the feeding vines from the damage the parasite infection had left behind. Scouts found food that fell in from the places their moving world touched and brought it back to their people in the meanwhile. The clerics continued to steer towards safety and a compatible place to latch onto.

ἐμπιστος oversaw almost as much. It was friends with many of the remaining scientists (and, in truth, many of the deceased ones) and clerics; even without the wisdom of the others fields, ἐμπιστος helped simply before offering its support.

The young cried at the darkness but σκιά could have never been more happy to see it. Drifting created a comfortable kind of blackness; so unlike the nightmare the lay underneath the skin of that parasite.

Its last call to them, that outrage or plea or just simple denial, would at times echo through their minds. σκιά did not believe themself to

be a gloating creature, but they could never deny letting the memories come. The reminder that they had won. The parasite had lost. Let it lose forever. Let a thousand curses fall upon it. Let it die as the miserable creature it by nature was. What it had done to their world was unforgivable.

But for now, σκιά was content to never see it again. The fate it had fallen to hardly mattered.

They found a new world. The slow process of shifting to its new skin began. σκιά remained busy keeping the larva and the young from panicking. The superstitious, likewise, were upset and had to be calmed. Then, the remaining nests were saw to and the food problem began to be addressed. During the panic, a few divergents fell on the bodies of the dead (or living) in either attention seeking through copycat actions or in genuine famished desperation. σκιά disposed of them quickly before they could alarm any more than those who had first seen the desecrations and reported them.

But in none of those disturbing cases was any trace of the parasite found.

When all had been stabilized, they had spread throughout their world and alerted each mortal that a new nest was to be built. Those that had been destroyed by the parasite would never be recovered. But they would build again. And so they did.

The ring around what had once been the Central Nest was built up. Different officials visited. Different nestworkers moved the vines and dug the trenches in the ground for young to fertilize in. It became their worlds largest Nest project in centuries. σκιά christened it in ceremony when the nest was complete; complete as a symbol to all of rebirth and life and victory.

It was the ώρα ειρήνης nest.

Peacetime.

In the calming build-down from the christening of the nest, σκιά

finally began to call back every fracture. They hovered above ἐμπιστος as they did so laboriously. It would reach their way every so often in or for reassurance, but remained busy with its friends. σκιά knew them: τρέφων directed feeding vines, ανδρείος was a warrior who was strong enough to delve into the void and keep dangers out during their drift times (and ἐμπιστος always worried to σκιά during those times of absences over its friend's safety), φως sought out light and how its energy could benefit their shadow world- and more and more. All ἐμπιστος's friends, but all were their friends as well.

σκιά watched over them as the scurried around in work or gripped each other with claws to provide easier channel for their minds to share emotions and ideas.

Are you almost ready? ἐμπιστος reached for them. One of its arms was around φως gently. The smaller mortal had melted into its friend's safe side.

They had long waited to meld again. To completely embrace, not just the fragments left behind in the shadow.

Almost, they rumbled and their shadows grew even closer to the ground in anticipation. ἐμπιστος replied with pulsating /HAPPINESS/, /EXCITEMENT/-

Another fragment returned.

φως began to make a low keen. The arm over it had tightened. And it continued to-

Another fragment flew back and slid into their shadow seamlessly. Another ounce of power returned.

I can't hardly wait , ἐμπιστος's voice roiled in anticipation. Already, their companion was reaching upwards, ready to be engulfed by them. φως's bony legs had began to writhe. The others were watching in trepidation, /UNEASE/, without moving, without understanding-

σκιά rolled down and pressed over ἐμπιστος just as φως's head split

into a mouth and screeched. There was black rolling down its side, black from the gashes that ἐμπιστος's claws were buried in. Claws that σκιά had never once seen used; not in this body of ἐμπιστος's nor any of the others.

They were both embracing even as σκιά's senses were keenly aware of every scream the smaller mortal was crying out. A mortal they were bound to protect. But one being hurt by another they were bound to protect- not just protect. They were loyal to it. So completely loyal. But ἐμπιστος was loyal to φως, wasn't it?

And even without that knowledge, even without the sight of the energy researcher collapsing on the ground while ἐμπιστος kept the body there with one arm down through its guts into the dirt below, σκιά could *feel*-

Every merge before had been partial. The guardian hadn't been complete. Hadn't been at full strength.

Hadn't felt the contained wrongness buried under ἐμπιστος's mind. Using ἐμπιστος's mental voice, body, embracing, feel- using everything. So much so that σκιά could not believe that ἐμπιστος had not been there.

But ἐμπιστος would not be spearing its friend right now. ἐμπιστος's mouth would never hang open as it did now, never dip laboriously towards the blood of its friend for a taste, never never never

Never willingly host the monster. And so every partial embrace, every loving word, everything they had shared with it since (they began the drift, they assumed) was **false** .

I wonder if you know...

σκιά's soul grew cold. The alien emptiness swarmed around them in the embrace, only now letting them see how false the voice was. How similar to ἐμπιστος's but just how /STILTED/. How stilted the embrace was. How the other embraces were.

σκιά felt revolting disgust. They had always been the most powerful being of this world and had never cared what other beings

in other worlds there were. Now, for the first time, σκιά longed for a stronger entity; one to swoop upon the situation, heal φως, return ἐμπιστος, kill the parasite. *Save them.* Save them from the guilt.

They had led everyone relying on them to believe that they had saved them. Now, they wished for being they could rely on that would succeed to protect them where σκιά had failed to protect their mortals. The parasite tilted ἐμπιστος's head and dipped it deeper into the twitching cavity in φως's dying front. The mimicry of their company surrounded them and squeezed. The wrong voice, so hidden while they had been split and busy with rebuilding and everyone else and not had time for ἐμπιστος, for their companion, for the one-

I've never been dead before, it said as if it could hear every guilt and doubt speeding through σκιά's mind.

And then the situation spiraled completely away. The other mortals had moved into action. They didn't know what was happening, what stood in their friends bodies, but they had seen what had happened to φως.

But ἐμπιστος had none of the restraint they did as they fought. ἐμπιστος wasn't ἐμπιστος at all.

σκιά knew this. They knew this. They reminded themselves of this as the parasite tore into each of them, despite σκιά's movements.

Their movements hardly mattered when they too were bludgeoned by restraint. No matter what rationality told them as the monster ripped into the flesh bodies with teeth and claws and feasted, they could not hurt the body of-of.

The other mortals were dying or dead. And ἐμπιστος's body gorged; its gray skin seemed dyed with their black blood and the head that had almost always been locked closed was wide with animalistic need.

And σκιά could do nothing.

To see someone they trusted turned into this animal, this mockery of who ἐμπιστος once was, standing over the mauled forms of

έμπιστος's friends-

Nightmares that had occasionally plagued σκιά's mind were nothing compared to this. Seeing έμπιστος like this was far more horrifying than anything they could have dreamed of.

σκιά watched as έμπιστος's bloody maw looked purposefully at them over a twitching body. Fangs that were rarely ever seen flashed under hanging skin and gore.

And σκιά could read the waves of emotions, however alien and wrong, pulsing out from the still open embrace.

/ TA U N TI NG /

S t ill trust me? It mocked in an almost perfect replica of έμπιστος's voice. *S t ill trust me forever?*

Then, image of their friend seared forever in their memory (replacing other images, those memories of έμπιστος, not this twisted version, the true έμπιστος subdued under this shocking image) until the other images were buried unreachable under this horror, σκιά did nothing but watch-

Watch as the mocking expression of έμπιστος melted away. Skin bubbled outwards. The open mouth stretched further in its taunting-in its erasal of the real έμπιστος's face.

The gums frothed until their red was matched with the visceral black coating now covering the crouched form. Flesh, slid forward and still sliding, coming from the split skin until it replaced any sight of the gray, of the arms, of the taunting mouth.

έμπιστος was gone.

And σκιά knew, in their soul, that έμπιστος had been gone long before their body melted into the bubbling mass before their shadows.

Even if the vivid memory of their friend crouched over mauled bodies of other friends tried to deny that fact with one far worse.

ώρα ειρήνης became a slaughter grounds. σκιά arrived to every emergency there too late. They watched as many others bubbled away into puddles like ἐμπιστος had.

And even when peaceless quiet descended after the parasite and its hosts disappeared to the corner feedings, σκιά still could not find their passion. Not for terror, not for anger, not for hope.

When they looked over their world, over every mind, over their own self, they saw no chance for victory again. For how could there be a win without ἐμπιστος? Without the nest keepers that raised larva? Without a guardian who could protect their people?

No, they found nothing raging inside themself when they searched in introspection.

They could find nothing but emptiness and images of those who trusted hanging in pieces from the carnivorous mouth of those they trusted.

AN: Not much left in σκιά's tale- there should be two more chapters of this bonus arc

As always, no beta, so if there are glaring problems please let me know

8. Bonus 2 σκιά (Part 3) (Last Resort)

σκιά *found they had no more hate to offer it. And so they moved to fear instead.*

There were alarms rippling through them. Each limb connected with the world, with the hive- and each one felt every cry for help when it would lift up.

And they could feel every abysmal oblivion replace sentient voices whenever the parasite ripped the person from a body.

Every one.

But σκιά could never arrive at the site of an alarm in time.

No matter how it had struck their briefly lived new central nest, the parasite's conquest of their world was no brief thing. The mortals here numbered many and the world itself had many ways of defending itself outside of σκιά's far reaching control.

That was not to say it was losing. But it was slow enough for every lost colony or nest or solitary target to cry out and cut off. Each time was pain. Each *failure*, a different sort of pain.

σκιά had lost energy for this fight after ἐμπιστος was killed and their memories of it desecrated. Now, instead of bursting in hope and pride that they would destroy this worthless monster, they grew quiet. Their arrival at each attack grew quicker and more desperate.

It would be there to greet them every time. Already wearing the skins of its newest victims and letting /GLEE/ exude clearly through its poisoned connection to the hive.

σκιά *found they had no more hate to offer it. And so they moved to fear instead.*

Another alarm carried through the hive.

Another section gone by the time they arrived.

σκιά formed out of shadows just in time to see the parasite finishing its dirty work. The mindless monsters it had made of their people turned their heads to look at σκιά as one.

Look who's here! it telecommunicated in ἐμπιστος's stolen voice. It took a liking to that voice and used it instead of the hollow one it had first spoke with here.

σκιά's speed drew short. The storm around them dissipated. Their shadows drifted; already willing to leave. Forever, in truth. They were ready to never rush to an alarm in vain again.

But there were still mortals connected to them. They couldn't give up. They had to *protect*. They had to *guard*. They had to save them all-

The parasite flicked backwards and σκιά could feel its presence withdrawing (Ready to take another group)

Wait!

There was a laborious pause. Then it turned and flashed the teeth of one host up at the guardian. The desperation in σκιά's tone had been evident to both.

σκιά knew they should feel stung. But they weren't.

Besides, what mattered was that while the parasite's attention was on them, it wasn't focused on others. It wasn't destroying any others so long as they spoke here.

And, in truth, σκιά was ready to offer anything so long as the creature did not devour any others.

Wait, they repeated quieter. *Answer me. Answer us all just this.*

Anything for you, it cooed. Menace was there, so obviously there, and σκιά wanted to fight it or flee but-

What do you want with this world? What do you want?

They had asked the same long before when σκιά had gone to bargain blindly. They had been naive then- they had not recognize the manipulations of a puppeteer, the vain nonsense behind believing any deal with malicious hunger would work-

Is it not obvious? The hosts stepped closer. *I want Y^O_＼/.*

The parasite's hosts melted into flesh. The mess built onto itself. Bones jutted like spines, muscles flapped, blood coagulated; none of the anatomy made any sense but making sense was not the point here. No, that was to see themself; their form, a 'body' of shadow limbs that saw across their realm and held each piece together. The picture of unity between their form and their mortals. All these eons and they could conjoin their minds. Now the parasite instead showed the conjunction of physical. And it was revolting. They wanted to turn from the replica.

Instead they forced their smoke still even as it raised the long head to nearly touch their own.

Your powerful form, the parasite murmured, *So strong. Your communication. It works with such ease. Your strength. That way you split apart to steal control? Wonderful.*

σκιά wanted to seethe. But they couldn't find it in themself to do so.

And? they prodded when the parasite fell silent. *Is there more? Would having that satisfy your departure?*

Please let there not be

(of course there would be)

Please just let it be something σκιά could offer.

Your pride, it humored, *I want your pride. I desire it.*

Then take my pride! they snapped back at the fleshy replica of themself. *Take it! Take me! Just take what you want and go!*

The break was a herald. No longer was σκιά sure of victory, no more did they even hope they could scrape by a win-

No. No, now they had one remaining cause for hope. That the parasite would take what it wanted and that somehow that would not include every mortal surviving in this world.

And its response was a herald as well. It rubbed the mimicry's head against σκιά's own barely solid one; the mess of bones sticking from the flesh itched along their grainy shadow. Perhaps if there was another like σκιά this action could be some instinctual greeting.

But with this mockery it was only revolting.

And even though σκιά did not move, did not flinch or snap and destroy this small fraction of parasitical hosts, the creature wasn't satisfied with their reaction. It tittered and stepped away. Melted in on itself. On the ground. The empty astral space twirled about them unseen and then was gone.

Gone. Without responding. Without accepting.

σκιά felt another colony drop into emptiness and still they did not move from the spot.

They brought every fraction of themself together under their storm. They built it up stronger and let its electric light spark frantically. They threw every mental barrier up until they were the very picture of their once impressive guardian status.

And they threw it all down under the parasite's presence.

It was desperation that fueled them. A frantic, last ditch effort. A final failing. A final chance at protecting the lives of their people.

And it responded only with howling amusement to their offered pleas.

Their shadow limbs stood over a shaking mortal. The parasite was prowling outside their barrier in a stolen body.

They tried to beg again. Tried to offer themself in exchange for this mortal and its world.

Do you think I mEant it? the stolen form shook, although not in fear like the one below but in mirth. You are not the most powerful being I have come across. You are not special. You are not my taRget here. Everything is.

This universe will be me. But you will be worthless.

Oh σκιά, ἐμπιστος's voice murmured softly, I will have you. But you are not as valuable as you think you are. No, no. This never was about you.

The parasite stole the mortal. Then it left and both bodies were hollow animals left behind to fall upon eachother.

And despite its words, σκιά could not stop pleading and offering. That was all they had the power for anymore.

9. Bonus 2 σκιά (Part 4) (Watcher)

Foregone conclusions will shed the journey's path in bitter light.

AN- These scenes do not necessarily go in chronological order. With that said, enjoy!

Fifty became twenty-five.

Ten became five.

Three became one.

σκιά tried to stand in the way before one became none.

It went through them. Stole the last of the populace. Keened into the air the sound of victory.

The world itself keened. Because their living world had been consumed. Every part of it- the soil, the vines, the air- was host to the parasite.

And σκιά? σκιά did not move from their spot of final failure for some time.

It let them fly by. As if the very world itself turned to watch/feel them pass. All empty stares. All malicious desire. All unconstrained / DELIGHT/. A pleasure σκιά could feel so much more clearly now after it had devoured their world and its way of speaking.

Long ago it had said it wanted them.

Well, now σκιά wasn't fighting. Now σκιά was nothing.

Why-Hadn't It-Come?-

The world watched them drift aimlessly. But it had yet to approach.

The one mercy σκιά had during the last cycles was that the parasite had seemed too busy to gloat. They hadn't heard it taunt after every single new soul stolen.

Of course, those losses had become statistics to both beings- hadn't they? The casualties were too large. Even they, the guardian of each and every mind in their reach, had gone numb from the overwhelming losses. It appeared the parasite had felt the novelty worn down as well.

Novelty picked up for it again at ten.

It had begun a countdown. Begun a game. σκιά barely paid heed to the rules. The outcome would be the same whether they fought or not.

There was an emotion undecipherable that stained the air where the parasite moved from.

Contented/Self-Assured satisfaction? The response of a well programmed toy?

Or striking *Disappointment/Dissatisfaction?* In them? In their response that it had made so guaranteed?

In truth? σκιά could not care.

They were its. And that was a truth σκιά could not flee from.

When the parasite used one nestworker to destroy its rare surviving larva, σκιά had not tried to protect the young. They had flown.

Twenty-four. That had been twenty-four. And the larva: twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one. Gone.

And σκιά had done nothing to try to save them.

But they were doomed- they were gone gone gone the moment the nestworker fell.

The parasite had pushed many thoughts/feelings at their departing

form but σκιά was too far broken to distinguish them.

This-

This was not them. This coward was not σκιά.

σκιά had been a brave and rightly arrogant immortal. They had formed of shadows before any flesh beings had. They had their five limbs, their true limbs, their original limbs, driven deeply in the realm itself. Everything here followed their pattern.

The mortals had mouths under five flaps of skin. The nests were shaped with one central lifespot and five branches that vines crawled down.

Had σκιά themself been patterned off this world? Or had they influenced it to build around them?

Had it mattered? No. The σκιά of old did not have answers but they knew what they were. They were the undisputed lord of this world. And the mortals they watched come and go-

They were precious. They were theirs.

Mortal though their minds were, they joined with σκιά. They grew.

And with each growth came new emotions. New capacity for emotion. And with each growth they never changed.

Not once. Not when ἐμπιστος first was born and first failed to die. Not when the world around them became increasingly civil and impressively technical.

σκιά would never have left three young to the unforgiving mouth of their elder.

Whatever they were now, they weren't that σκιά. They weren't the hive when the hive had been devoured by a monster. They didn't know where that bravery and power had left to.

But what they did know was that this new creature they had been condensed to was the creation of a creature that, by nature, could

only steal and destroy.

The parasite had made them, whoever they were, and they could do nothing but watch as their designer did everything it desired to.

The game began at the last. They had not stepped in to exude any efforts to be a floodgate to the insatiable. Not until it was the last terrified individual.

Its name was *γκρί*. Or it had been. Now it was *τελευταίος*. It was the last.

Whether by skilled survival/avoidance or simply the choice of the parasite to get to that mortal last, *τελευταίος* had lived.

Now they were alone. Neither immortal or mortal felt they would live-

How could they?

How could they?

σκιά felt a passion that had been suppressed by failure. It revived in the end. Revived with the last. Because they wanted-they wanted-

So. Badly. To protect it.

σκιά took it up. They fled place to place beneath what remained of their storm. *τελευταίος* knew how to navigate this new world.

But the world- it was the parasite. All it.

There was no way out. Every gateway blocked by the empty thing it was. Every pass through of twisted landscape was seen. Felt.

Watched by the parasite. It didn't matter if they never caught sight of the hosts made from stolen minds. Everywhere they went, it was pressing on them.

And eventually neither could take it.

τελευταίος wanted to live as it had; even if that meant dying. So it instigated the ritual those too old to live on would (if any existed still). And σκιά was there-

Waiting to take them.

It would mean the erasal of τελευταίος. Only one mortal had ever survived a complete meld. But τελευταίος was at peace with that. Desperate for that, in truth.

It wanted to die in its guardians hold. Its devotion for them ignored what they were-

(Failure)

So with the entire realm pressing in around them, σκιά reached for their last mortal and snuffed it.

And even that was not enough.

Oh no. Not for the parasite. It couldn't bear to not have another set of memories, another mind, another mockery.

The empty tendrils pressed in and tugged at τελευταίος's splintering self. Stole what it could. And all the while σκιά steeled themselves to feel themselves shredded into oblivion-

And was left alone at the site of the game's end.

They stopped drifting. There was nothing new to see.

Before, there was always something new to see. New lives born in small weak forms as the old died. Always new- but never anymore. The parasite did not make new. It took and took and never gave-

σκιά could no longer find it inside themselves (what remained of themselves) to bring a storm again.

The lord of storms was a forgotten figurehead of a race extinct. Destroyed.

And never gone. They couldn't rest if they could not end, but the parasite kept what it stole.

Peace would ever be elusive. σκιά, and whatever remained of their people/world/otherworlds, could only hope for one possibility again. The possibility that somewhere, something would be strong enough to succeed where they had failed. That someday the parasite would be somehow erased and all those stolen minds could finally be lost to death.

σκιά stopped moving. They stopped thinking.

They had spent the last deaths without the power to do anything but watch. And the parasite had made it clear that it wished for their prize meal to stay and see every move it made.

Now there was nothing left to watch.

The only game left was one of waiting- anticipating the arrival of the one who had created this pitiful mockery of what σκιά once was.

It was /BOREDOM/. There were many alien emotions exuding from the one who'd bested them on the execution date. But that was the strongest.

Had it always been the strongest?

Had everything here been a response to boredom?

σκιά would rage. Would wish for this things end to be as violently justified as its killer could bear to give it.

Would would would but this new thing they were could barely raised their form up from the ground.

They had been ready. They had thought they had been ready.

But now the ground rolled and waved forward and the air was full of it and there were glimpses of bloodstained mindless hosts of flesh through the shadows and-and-

σκιά reared up.

They weren't ready. They weren't ready. They weren't

rEad`Yi

And their mind strained and screamed and

What σκιά could no longer realize, as they could no longer realize anything (that process required thinking after all), was that they were wrong.

First in counting. τελευταίος was not one. It had been two. It had been the second to last.

They were the last. And with them, the shadow world was host to a parasite that had taken hundreds without finding security against its fear of starvation nor satiation from that same threat.

But they were right about their own ending. σκιά had not died when the parasite finally grew inpatient enough to dive inside and absorb them.

Not truly. Because σκιά was gone long before the parasite made the land collapse over their form and stole them for itself.

The shadow world drifted. It sailed through the void untouched by other realms. Or so it had for a very, very long time.

The skin it last wore was fading. But structures were still there.

Quietly there.

And creatures still roamed among them. Mindless animals that mauled and devoured any others they ran across. It had not taken long for their population to shrink down. For the animals to be left as lone wanderers scouting for food. Food that never erased the hunger.

It was a side effect of the possession. As was the lobotomized state.

And that they were never meant to eat what they now did. They were

meant to be fed by vines designed to offer sustenance for them.

But that was beyond them to grasp.

Under the clawed feet of these prowling creatures were five branches.

Limbs.

They held the realm together as it was afloat in the void.

Each limb was hollow. Each hollow was filled. Filled with *emptiness*-

Not all that unlike the void beyond.

But this emptiness hungered. It left traces and emotions - *it lingered*.

It may not currently reside in every mindless creature crawling on the land. But it permeated the world. Floated in every spore. Lay in every vine. Sat condensed among the sky.

Among chaos and energy: among the storm.

It lay there in its favorite form and basked in what almost felt like satisfaction.

AN- Thanks for coming on this ride with me! Back when I wrote the first chapter I never expected to delve so far into the story of the shadow monster hosting the Mindflayer of that 'verse. But okiá was a surprising character to write for and demanded their story be told- a story with a foregone conclusion and world both unlike our own and yet permeated with the same emotional strengths and downfalls of a human. Again, I do hope you enjoyed this bonus arc!